15.0.7
St3.36B
5052

MR. BAKER'S SERMON

ON THE DEATH OF

MRS. MARY ANN STEARNS.

Box 176 No. 2345.

A

SERMON

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF

MRS. MARY ANN STEARNS.

DELIVERED NOVEMBER 20, 1840.

BY A. R. BAKER,
PASTOR OF THE SECOND CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN MEDFORD.

BOSTON:
PRINTED BY REQUEST, BUT NOT PUBLISHED.
1841.

WILLIAM S. DAMRELL, PRINTER,
No. 9 Cornhill, Boston.

SERMON.

DEUTERONOMY 32: 29.

O, THAT THEY WERE WISE, THAT THEY UNDERSTOOD THIS, THAT THEY WOULD CONSIDER THEIR LATTER END.

How much the impression, which this inspired declaration makes upon our hearts, would have been increased, if, instead of hearing it in the sanctuary, we had stood among the thousands of Israel upon the plains of Moab with Moses the servant of God before us, and had heard it from his lips, with the assurance of his ascending upon Mount Nebo before the setting sun, to behold the promised inheritance and to die. The thought of the approaching death, and the speedy entrance into eternity, of him who led the people of God through the sea and the wilderness, who brought for their support water from the rock and bread from heaven, and who was uttering, in these words, his last and strongest desires for his surviving friends, must have written them as with the point of a diamond upon the tablet of the mind. Such were the circumstances, under which the text was spoken to the ancient Israelites by their leader and guide.

But, my hearers, Moses is not the only one who has so comprehensively and forcibly uttered in the chamber of death, and on the threshold of eternity, the gushing emotions of a pious soul toward surviving relatives and friends. Many a pious father and mother, when they have cast a last look toward the members of their family; many a devout brother and sister, when the chill of death has been settling upon their bodies, have been heard repeating this importunate prayer.

Indeed, were all the desires toward us of that one of dear and cherished memory, over whom the grave has so recently closed, to be collected into a single comprehensive expression, I know of none which would so properly convey them to our hearts as this: "O, that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!"

It brings distinctly to mind that which she and every dying child of God realizes to be *the chief end of life.* We may deceive ourselves on this point, while we move round in the circles of worldly ambition, of wealth, fashion, pleasure, learning and fame; but when we are arrested by the iron hand of disease, when the king of terrors advances, and we know that the lamp of life is waning, and will soon be extinguished for ever, and that the amazing realities of eternity will shortly burst upon our view; then it is that experimental piety appears to us, what it is in truth, the greatest and best of gifts—our chief concern here below. Then, my hearers, will you understand that your minister was not advancing an idle theory, but proclaiming the most important of all truths, when he proposed that you should make every other pursuit secondary and auxiliary to this, and was not unduly earnest in persuasion, when he urged you by all the motives within his reach to live as the gospel requires, in godliness and honesty. Nay, I fear you may then

rather wonder, how he could speak and you hear upon a theme of such immediate and everlasting consequence with so little emotion! Then wisdom will be the principal thing; all else will be accounted nothing — less than nothing, vanity and vexation.

But what is the wisdom, which the dying child of God is so anxious surviving friends should possess? "O, that they were wise!" But *wise* in respect to what? *The fashion of refined society?* O, no! To them the fashion of the world is passing away; and it is of little importance whether they have moved in the first circles, or in those of subordinate rank; and whether they have secured the admiration of the many or the few. They are not regardless of refinement, nor of external appearance, nor of the opinion of their fellow-men; but they cannot devote to the outward forms of society the time, thoughts nor affections which God claims; and if they see those who are near and dear to them bestowing so much attention to the outward, material and perishing, as to induce a neglect of the inward, spiritual and deathless, they are filled with amazement and sorrow; and exclaim, "O, that they were wise!"

But, *wise*, I ask again, in regard to what? Surely *not the pleasures of the world;* for of what importance to them are all the gratifications of time and sense, except as they find them in the path of duty, and discover in them the benevolent designs of their Father in heaven?

Is it, then, the wisdom of acquiring and possessing great wealth, which they desire for their surviving friends? This, also, they have seen to be vanity and vexation of spirit; and now, when thousands of gold and silver cannot purchase for them a day, an hour, nor a moment; and if they could, have not the power to fill even so short a space with any substantial good; and when they turn their believing eye upward, and survey those heavenly

treasures, upon the full and everlasting enjoyment of which they are so soon to enter, gold and silver appear like the dust of the balance. To them wisdom is better than gold, and understanding rather to be chosen than silver. It is no earthly good, upon which their hearts are fixed.

The invaluable wisdom which dying saints desire for their surviving friends is that piety which the Scriptures style, "*the fear of the Lord.*" Experience teaches them why the sacred writers give it this appellative; for they find it consists essentially in love—supreme love to God, a complacent regard for his people, and a benevolent affection toward mankind; and produces a fear to displease God or violate the rights of men. Hence they fear to transgress the divine law, and, like John,* find its commands not grievous, but concurrent with the inclinations of their own hearts. They realize the truth of the declaration, "whosoever is born of God overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." Their hearts respond to the precepts and promises of the Bible, like Paul's "yea and amen to the glory of God." †

But their fear is not that slavish fear which worketh wrath, and to which sinners are in bondage, a fear of God's presence, government, laws and threatenings; but it is the fear of the godly which worketh righteousness, and produces a peace which the world can neither give nor take away; but which abideth when other comforts fail, and which becomes in death especially precious as a foretaste of heaven.

When they look upon their surviving friends who profess the name of Christ, and see them, it may be, gloomy and disconsolate, and remember the divine promises, that the almighty Comforter shall abide with his people and dwell in them for ever, that he shall work in them the good pleasure of their heavenly Father's will, and shall

---

* 1 John 5: 3, 4. † 2 Cor. 1: 19.

communicate to them of their Saviour's fulness, they cannot but address them in the language of Isaiah to Israel, O, that they would hearken to their Redeemer, and let him make their peace as a river, and their righteousness as the waves of the sea;*—that their salvation might go forth as a lamp that burneth;†—and that their profiting might appear to all.‡

When their eyes or their thoughts fix upon the loved ones who are still out of Christ, and they call to mind the divine declaration, which saith that there is no peace to the wicked,—they are like the troubled sea, which cannot rest; especially, when they think of the Saviour of their impenitent friends, of what he is, has done and suffered for them, and of the Comforter who is ready, willing, and waiting to enlighten, renew, sanctify and save them, they cannot but adopt the language of Moses; "O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear God and keep all his commandments always, that it might be well with them and with their children for ever!"§ Or they take up the lamentation of the Saviour over Jerusalem, O, that they did but know, even they, in this their day, the things which belong to their peace!‖ They cannot endure the thought, that their fellow-christians should not share abundantly in that fear of the Lord which produces peace, nor that their impenitent friends should live strangers to the richest of blessings.

Experience teaches them, it will be utterly impossible for their christless friends to encounter the king of terrors with the least hope of victory, without divine assistance. Hence they ask them, as Isaiah did the unbelieving Jews, "What will ye do in the day of visitation? To whom will ye flee for help?"¶ You reject, or at least you do

---

* Isa. 48: 18. † Isa. 62: 1. ‡ 1 Tim. 4: 15.
§ Deut. 5: 29 ‖ Luke 19: 42. ¶ Isa. 10: 3.

not receive by the renewing of your minds, and by faith, the precious Saviour, who is our only support, and whom we find all which the Scriptures declare,—the Lord our righteousness—our guide through the valley of the shadow of death—our beloved on whose kind arm we may lean when no other can support us—and the captain of our salvation, who has disarmed death of its sting, and the grave of its terror, and who giveth us the victory; if you have not an interest in this almighty Saviour, what will you, what can you do, when the pains of death get hold upon you? O, my hearers, it is his peace, support and comfort which awaken and strengthen their desire that their surviving friends may be wise.

They realize why piety is called *wisdom;* it is because it induces men to make a proper use of life,—to devote it, according to its original design, to the great work of preparation to meet God, to dwell with him, and to enjoy him for ever, because it harmonizes the finite to the infinite Mind. Hence the pursuits of worldly ambition and sin appear to them as they really are, *foolish.*

They understand why piety is called the "*beginning* of wisdom;" for they know there is no true wisdom in the carnal mind before it is renewed, nothing which can secure the favor of the Lord. When they look back upon their lives from the chamber of death, and call to mind the manner in which God searched them out and found them while they were lost in sin, the manner in which he took their feet from the horrible pit and the miry clay, and planted them upon the Rock of ages, shed the light of his reconciled countenance on them in the midst of darkness, and filled them with the hopes and blessings of the gospel; when they remember that it was not by works of righteousness which they had done, but according to his mercy he saved them, by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost, they feel that there

was a time when, like others, they were void of spiritual understanding, when their foolish minds were darkened, and they were without God and without hope in the world. Their experience has confirmed the declarations of the Bible, which asserts that this wisdom was not born into the world with them, but actually had a beginning; they may or they may not be able to designate the day and the hour when it was first implanted in their hearts, but of this one thing are they sure, that it is not hereditary; they asked, God gave; they opened their hearts, and he filled them with this heaven-born wisdom.

To him they look to preserve his gift, and they feel assured that he who has begun a good work in them will carry it on to perfection, and will not leave them comfortless when they most need his support. They know that their friends, too, must die, and that a heavy affliction is about to fall on them, and they desire them to share the same adequate support and comfort.

Hence we see that the desires of the dying children of God for their surviving friends are not what they are sometimes imagined, mere ebullitions of feeling, without any just and corresponding convictions of the understanding, but emotions awakened by distinct apprehensions of the most important truths; they arise from a just view of human life as a season of preparation for a peaceful death and a blessed immortality, from a definite knowledge of the origin, object, nature and fruits of true wisdom, from man's natural destitution of holiness, and from the facility which Christ offers for acquiring this gift. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find." How simple! Salvation, by asking for it! No wonder the dying children of God, when they see their dearest earthly connections neglecting or refusing salvation on such terms, should exclaim, "O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!"

The *motive*, to which they here appeal, is worthy of notice; it relates to the latter end of their friends, to death and the retributions of eternity. "O, that they would consider *their latter end!*"—How life will appear to them when they come to look back upon it as we do from the bed of death; especially if it has passed without attaining the end for which it was given!—How their Sabbaths, sanctuary privileges, and other means of grace will appear, when they are gone for ever!—How they will be able to endure the agonies of death without any Saviour to support them!—How they themselves will appear in the judgment without his advocacy and friendship!—How they will endure everlasting banishment from him, from heaven, from all holiness and happiness! O, that they would consider how these amazing truths and realities will appear to them in the hour of death; and would act in a manner which will then give them peace!

We, my hearers, do not feel the influence of this motive as they do, because we do not divest ourselves of the vain illusions of hope. We expect to live. We say to ourselves, like the foolish man in the gospel, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink and be merry;" when perhaps God is saying, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee." But let us stand, as the gospel requires, in the posture of servants waiting for their Lord; let us live like Paul, in readiness to be offered; and pray like David, "Lord, make me to know mine end, the measure of my days, what it is, that I may know how frail I am;" let us bring death before our eyes as a present reality, and not as a vision of the distant future: and then shall we realize the power of our dying friends' persuasion, to which we will now turn our attention.

No language of mine can do justice to the ardent emotions of her soul, as she pressed her friends' hands in hers, and, after the manner of Moses in the text, besought

them to remember, love, serve and enjoy the blessed Redeemer. To perceive the beauty and force of her expostulation, we need to enter her sick chamber, and see her seated in the arm-chair of death; we need to contrast the marble paleness of her cheek with the divine lustre of her eye, and the heavenly smile and radiance of her whole countenance; and to hear it in the soft and subduing tones of her own faltering voice. But, alas, that voice is now silent in death, and those eyes sealed till the morning of the resurrection!

Still it is due to grace, and to the God of grace, to relate in this public manner and this sacred place, some of her desires for the living, and of the other exercises of her mind during the last few weeks of her life. I am indebted for the account to a communication, received from her surviving companion and friends, as well as to my own recollection.

The Spirit of grace seems to have given the mind of our lamented friend, Mrs. Mary Ann Stearns,* a

* The subject of this notice was born in Boston, Sept. 3d, 1816, and was the eldest daughter of Dea. Samuel and Mrs. Hannah P. Train, of Medford. She was early consecrated to God in the ordinance of baptism, and in fulfilment of the obligations of the covenant into which this rite introduced her, was taught by her parents, in childhood and youth, the doctrines and duties of the Christian religion. Though she had early religious impression, and after a season of deep seriousness made a public profession of faith in Christ, at eighteen years of age; yet it is not easy, neither is it necessary, to determine whether she was then a subject of renewing grace, or became one at a later period of her life; since the particular time of conversion is of far less importance than the scriptural evidences of such a change, which were strongly and abundantly developed in her during her last sickness. In her twentieth year she married Mr. George L. Stearns, son of the lamented Dr. Stearns, of this town. Her health began to decline in the autumn of 1839; and for the recovery of it, early in the following year she visited the Virginia Springs, from which she returned to her parental home, in the month of September, where she died on Monday, the 9th of November, 1840, aged twenty-four years.

special direction toward spiritual subjects before her return from her summer residence at the Virginia Springs, and to have prepared her in some humble degree to receive, on her return to her parental home, the intelligence that she had but a short time to live. From this period she devoted every wakeful moment to the preparation of herself and her friends for the event before her. She scrupulously avoided herself, and desired others to avoid in her presence, all worldly conversation, and to make the soul and its Saviour the great topics of conversation, reading and prayer; and for the encouragement of the young in the study of the Bible, it should be here remarked, that she derived great benefit and satisfaction from repeating passages of Scripture and of sacred poetry, which she had committed to memory in early childhood. She dwelt with peculiar pleasure upon the fourteenth chapter of John, and the ninety-first Psalm.

In one of my earliest pastoral visits to her, I found her meditating on Christ as a sacrifice for her sins,—a train of thought which seemed to have been awakened by the twenty-third section of a book entitled "My Saviour," and which brought relief to her bitter reflections upon her backslidden life, and prepared her for that sense of pardoning mercy, and for those remarkable displays of sovereign grace, which distinguished her remaining days. She desired me to sit down by her side, and rehearse the story of redemption, from its origin in the counsels of the eternal Mind to its application to a sinful worm of the dust, and to his final entrance into heaven, dwelling especially upon the offices of Christ.

In compliance with her request, and while her eye was fixed with a concentration and intensity of interest never to be forgotten, I commenced with the covenant of grace formed between the persons of the ever-blessed Trinity, foretold to our fathers under the ancient dispensation,

and ratified in the fulness of time by the incarnation of the Son of God. He, by combining in himself perfect humanity and supreme divinity, formed a channel of communication between the restrained benevolence of the Father and the misery of guilty men. By his perfect obedience, he satisfied the claims of offended justice; by receiving the penalty we had incurred, he discharged our amazing debt to the law; and, by his meritorious sufferings and death, secured for us the offer of pardon and eternal life. Thus he becomes the door, through which we may enter into that pure, spiritual temple not made with hands, in which he resides, and where he ministers for us at the celestial altar. But this did not satisfy his unspeakable love. He knew the hardness of the human heart, our tendency to ruin to be such, that if left with the mere offer of pardon and eternal life, we should choose the way of sin and death; and therefore he sent down the Holy Ghost to strive with us, and to seal us heirs of grace, to form us in his likeness and for his enjoyment, to renew, to sanctify, and to fill us with the divine fulness.

The presentation of these scriptural and essential elements of the system of redemption, which occupied but a short space of time, evidently made a deep impression upon her heart; and when it was ended, turning her eyes toward heaven, she exclaimed, "O, it is wonderful! Christ is the door through which I may enter the kingdom. I *can* trust him. I am not afraid to die, nor to leave my soul and all my interests in his hands, for he will do right."

From this time, her views of her Saviour and of heaven were remarkable for their clearness, and for the happiness they communicated to her soul. Sometimes she would compare her passage to the world of spirits to the course

of a voyager, saying, "It seems to me I am in a most beautiful bark, descending a river of unruffled surface, whose distant banks are lined with the most delightful landscape, while Jesus, my pilot, is at the helm, gently guiding me, as I look out ever and anon to descry the haven of rest to which he conducts me." At other times she would liken it to a gentle ascent upon the wings of angels, and to such scenes as exhibited her humble trust in her Saviour, and the delightful conceptions and emotions of her mind.

As her weakness increased, her views of spiritual subjects became brighter and more glorious, so that the last hours of her life were spent in the most rapturous praise of God, giving those who witnessed her the assurance that love had cast out the fear of death, and exalted her almost above the consciousness of pain.

Much of her conversation and many of her prayers, which it would be pleasant to me to repeat and profitable for you to hear, the time and the occasion compel me to omit, and urge me to hasten to the closing scene of her life. One week after she united in a private celebration of the Christian passover, and took upon herself afresh the obligations of the covenant, and on the last Sabbath morning of her life, she inquired of her husband, "Do you think I shall live through the day?" And on his replying that it was probable she might, she added, "O, how pleasant it would be to go from a Sabbath on earth to an eternal Sabbath in heaven!" She longed to be released, and to join the company of the redeemed above, as these words which she then sung will show:

> "When shall I see my Father's face,
> And in his bosom rest?"

She often repeated parts, especially the last verse, of the 199th of the Village Hymns:

"O, glorious hour! O, blest abode!
I shall be near and like my God!
And flesh and sin no more control
The sacred pleasures of my soul."

When she was evidently struck with death, she repeated the following words, being almost a literal quotation from the 116th Psalm: "The pains of death gat hold upon me; I found trouble and sorrow; then cried I unto the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me out of all my distresses." When her breathing had become so difficult that she was hardly able to articulate, she could still be indistinctly heard, slowly pronouncing the words, "*Glorious!—O—glorious—heaven!—Come—Lord—Jesus—come—quickly!—Lord—Jesus—receive—my—spirit!*" As the last words fell from her trembling lips, she leaned forward in her chair, rested her head upon her mother's shoulder, and expired.

As I turn my thoughts from her ascending spirit to the circle of her mourning relatives, I am at a loss to determine, my friends, whether you have more occasion to mourn or to rejoice. Indeed, it appears to me you should abound in both. Certainly you should rejoice; and as often as you approach the throne, should make humble and grateful acknowledgment for these remarkable displays of divine grace; and you cannot but mourn, that one so dear to you, and in whom the glory of the Lord shone so conspicuously before your eyes, is no more. Your loss is great; but to none is it so great as to you, my dear friend, who are bereft by this providence of the companion of your life. Little did I anticipate, when I was here entering the sacred office, that I should ever be called to discharge the solemn duties of this hour,—called to address you in the loneliness of widowhood. My

death, or yours, or my partner's, were either of them as probable as that of your wife, when we four at first surrounded your social board. But she is gone, and we are left; and if you ask why, the only answer which can be given is, "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight." It is the work of your Father in heaven; and will you not therefore say, with the Shunamite of old, "It is well?" But you have occasion for gratitude and thankfulness, as well as for submission. Few, very few husbands, who are called to witness the painful scene through which you have passed, are permitted to behold such displays of mercy and grace in their dying companions; and the fact should leave upon your mind this abiding impression, that God, who has so ordered it, has therein some special design of mercy toward your own soul. Follow, my afflicted friend, the leadings of Providence; open your heart wide for the admission of the glorious Saviour and almighty Comforter who dwelt so remarkably in your companion, that since she is no more, they may be your constant companions, and when you die, may enable you through faith to triumph in the same glorious manner. We commend you to God and to his grace.

We would also remind the afflicted parents that they have now a new attraction to the celestial throne, a fresh occasion for grateful praise in every prayer. It is not the common privilege of parents to witness in their children what God has allowed you to behold in your departed child the last few weeks—such resignation and faith—such views of heaven and the Saviour—such prayers, joys and triumph. If you mourn, let it be that such an aid to your faith, piety and usefulness was not spared to you longer. But forget not to praise God for what he did for

her, and through her for you and for your family. Rejoice that he has filled that upper chamber of your habitation, in which she expired, with such hallowed associations, that you may resort to the very spot from which she went to heaven, for meditation and prayer; may there from time to time gather your surviving children around you, and, while you wait for the hour of your own departure, may rehearse these remarkable displays of divine grace. Dwell on them, that your sorrow may be turned into joy, your doubts into the assurance of hope, and your hearts into the dwelling of the Lord. I seem to hear the same voice, which formerly entreated you in that chamber to put on a more cheerful and active piety, saying to you, "Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and your surviving children!"

But to you, children, it speaks rather in the language of my text, "O, that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!" If you would partake of the wisdom which is here set before you, which your departed sister urged you with her expiring breath to secure, and which she regretted that she had not also recommended by a more eminently holy and consistent life; if you would share divine consolation under your heavy bereavement, remember these with all other spiritual gifts and graces are to be obtained at the foot of the cross; you can secure them only by yielding to the waiting Spirit, who strives to form you in the glorious likeness of the Son of God,—by submitting yourselves, soul and body, time, talents, wealth and learning, all you have, and are, and hope for, entirely to him who has redeemed you by his precious blood. I beseech you, both in her name and in his, come to your glorious Saviour. Confess your sins, tell him the story

of your grief; and he will pardon and comfort you. Afflicted, poor, guilty and perishing, come to him for consolation, forgiveness and eternal life. Be entreated to come without delay, by her oft repeated prayer, by her dying expostulation, by her early death, and your momentary exposedness to die.

To all others afflicted by this affliction, especially to this church, her death speaks a most instructive lesson. It demands of you, beloved in the Lord, gratitude. You have been permitted to witness or to hear of unusual displays of grace in one of your number, and that too in a member of this church who has often been the subject of your solicitude and of your prayers. What God has done for her, should teach you what he can do for you and others. You are here called to renewed devotedness and more active piety. God has taught you by her how much you yourselves may enjoy, not in your expiring hours merely, but while your health and strength continue. Would to Heaven your souls were now and might for ever be pervaded with the Spirit which dwelt so abundantly in her! O, that you were so filled with it that you could contain no more! Then what lights you would be in the world! What spiritual giants! You may enjoy all which she enjoyed, and may spare yourself a reflection which often forced itself upon her. "If," said she, "it were possible for me to get well, how delightful it would be to take a decided stand as a Christian, and to show the power of that religion I have professed, but never lived up to,—how much good I might do! But it is a more precious privilege to die and be with Christ. O, the glories of heaven, where there is no storm, no disease, and no sin!" Brethren, the privilege denied her is or may be yours; and that granted her may soon be yours

also. Live, therefore, while you live, in such a manner that when you die you may be able to adopt the language of the apostle, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith!"

To those who are out of Christ, especially to the young, and such as have recently formed their connections for life, the voice of this providence is loud and solemn. It calls you, my young friends, to the pursuit of wisdom, to immediate preparation for death, to the exercises of a heart which is renewed in the image of God, and is full of righteousness and peace, and without which all other gifts and acquisitions will soon be as if they had never been, and will leave you poor and comfortless. Abuse not the solemn warning, by living longer without God and without hope in the world, in the vain expectation of securing such displays of grace in your dying hour, when the uncommonness of these, in the case of your departed friend, rebukes your delay. Few are so distinguished in death; enough to animate the hopes and exertions of Christians, but not enough to encourage procrastination and abuse of grace.

God ordinarily allows men to enjoy in death just those measures of grace which they with his assistance have obtained and matured in life. You may expect to die as you live; if you are contented to live without God, you ought to expect to die without his support; if you can now reject the Saviour, be not surprised if he does not hear, answer and bless you when you cry to him from your thorny death-bed; if you can resist the present strivings of the Spirit, think it not strange when death seizes you, and a dreadful sense of your sins, of approaching judgment, and of the retributions of eternity comes over you, if you are left without a divine Comforter,—left to

die in darkness, guilt and despair. But to-day you may be wise; you may yield to the Holy Ghost, who calls you, and even waits to be gracious and to infuse into your souls the principle of spiritual life which shall seal you heirs of grace and joint heirs with Christ to an immortal and heavenly inheritance. "Be wise to-day, 't is madness to defer." Hear the voice which comes up to you from the grave, and live. "O, that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!"